

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Witness Testimony

LIEUTENANT COLONEL A. LEWIS DEAL UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE, AND OCEANS

14 MAY 1998

H.R. 2760, THE DISABLED SPORTSMEN'S ACCESS ACT

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife, and Oceans, it is my great pleasure and honor to address you today on such an historic piece of legislation. I would like to begin by acknowledging the leadership of Rep. Cunningham and Sen. Burns for their leadership on behalf of disabled sportsmen.

BACKGROUND

The genesis and foundation for my involvement with disabled sportsmen began at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, in 1993. I read an article in the March 1993 edition of OUTDOOR LIFE magazine addressing the needs and challenges of disabled sportsmen returning to the great outdoors. It occurred to me that Quantico could develop a hunting program that would allow access for our disabled veterans. I wrote a proposal and sent it to Brigadier General Steele who at that time was the base Commanding General. His decision was quick and decisive, "We are going to make this happen." With the help of eager volunteers, donated materials from the Paralyzed Veterans of America and a local hardware store, we constructed several wooden ground blinds. That fall we initiated a disabled veterans "pilot" hunting program. It was a huge success. Quantico now has a fully integrated disabled hunting program open to any disabled sportsman. The hunting program includes deer, small game, and turkey. There are 10 permanent ground blinds and a "HUNTMASTER" elevating lift. The base Boy Scout Troop just completed building wheelchair accessible paths for our Trap/Skeet range. We are also in the final planning stages for building a handicapped accessible fishing pier. We feel Quantico has a model program for other DoD installations. In fact, I have received requests from disabled veterans as far away as Oklahoma and Florida asking to come hunt at Quantico. I do not feel disabled veterans should have to travel that far to utilize a military facility, especially when there are military bases in their home states.

CONCEPT

Since the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed in 1990, there has been a tremendous groundswell of support for people with disabilities in this country. Nationwide there are hundreds of programs and initiatives to give citizens with disabilities access to buildings, facilities, and recreational activities.

The Department of Defense (DoD) manages nearly 25 million acres of land, containing every conceivable land form and type of habitat. These well managed lands provide environments in which fish and game animals flourish. Our military installations offer numerous outdoor recreation programs (fishing, hunting, trap/skeet, boating, camping, wildlife viewing, etc.) which provide outstanding opportunities for both military and civilian sportsmen.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is dedicated to administering federal programs and benefits for nearly 28 million veterans. There are approximately 9 million veterans classified as "disabled" of which nearly 78,000, due to a spinal cord injury or dysfunction (SCD) are in wheelchairs. The SCD numbers are increasing at 1,200 to 1,500 a year. This is due in part to the "aging" of the veterans population (9.3 million, 65 or older by the year 2000) and its associated medical problems. In this era of decreasing budgets and healthcare reform, the VA is constantly seeking resources and innovative programs to provide for adequate healthcare and improved quality of life.

It is a well documented fact that outdoor activities for people with disabilities are more than just recreation, they are **therapeutic**. They add an intangible quality to life and personal well being. The opportunity to have access to outdoor facilities/programs is a powerful form of proactive rehabilitation which emphasizes outpatient vice inpatient healthcare.

An invaluable source of "volunteer" support and resources for assistance on this issue are the national service and military organizations (i.e., Paralyzed Veterans of America, Inc., Marine Corps League, Vietnam Veterans Institute, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Jewish War Veterans of the United States, Association of the United States Army, Navy League of the United States, Air Force Association, AMVETS, etc.).

There are also numerous sporting industry and public-private sporting organizations which are already assisting in other disabled outdoor projects (The Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc., National Shooting Sports Foundation, Coalition to Promote Accessible Outdoor Recreation, Haas Outdoors Inc., Savage Arms, Inc., National Wheelchair Shooting Sports Federation, Safari Club International, Fishing has no boundaries, Inc., Ducks Unlimited, The Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Buckmasters, etc.).

Summary

In closing I would like to thank all the individuals and organizations across the country who have worked so hard in support of disabled sportsmen.

My involvement with disabled sportsmen, specifically our disabled veterans has been a deeply rewarding and satisfying experience. When I have put the call out for volunteers to help with our program at Quantico the response has always been nothing less than overwhelming. I am confident that such support will continue.

Thank you for allowing me to be here today. I am eagerly standing by to assist in any manner I can.
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